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Hands

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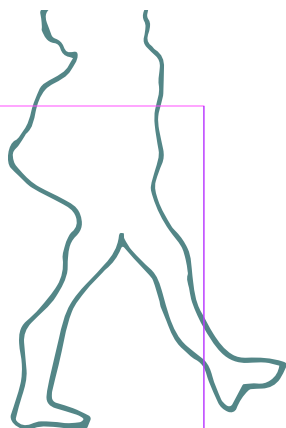
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hands

lucy gardner



I met a girl on vacation whose name was the same as mine. Not many people have that name anymore. Just women who are retired and grumpy and smell like Marlboro Reds. This girl was twelve and blonde and bold as hell. A bunch of us were in the campground's pool, and when the lifeguard whistled at her to stop skipping around the edge, she held both arms out in front of her and flipped him off with the one middle finger she had. The other hand was missing. Like it'd been hacked off with a saw right above the wrist. She still held it up though. I think the lifeguard shit his pants when he saw it. He'd been flipped off by an invisible hand.

I laughed so hard my body got tight. She saw me laughing and decided to attach herself to me for the remainder of the trip. She was devastatingly open about her life. She told me about how she'd been to Juvie last year for shoplifting. She'd wrecked her mother's car. She justified this with her age though. She told me about all the high-school parties she'd been to, the boys she'd kissed, and the plans she had for the rest of the summer. I only listened and interjected an occasional "yeah" with wide eyes to show my interest in her enthralling life-story.

I left that trip very content with my luck in finding one of the most interesting people I'd ever met. She only flippantly mentioned her missing hand during one of our days together, and I didn't bring it up any after that. I suppose she's had to explain its absence a few too many times.

She caught me staring at it one day and laughed. "I bet you're wondering where this guy is?" she asked. She held her arm up and the skin moved. Like some little creatures were swimming around in her bloodstream. I must have greened because she laughed even harder.

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"Those are my muscles. Just because my phalanges are gone doesn't mean I don't have the muscles that went along with them."

The word "phalanges" made me flinch.

"Went?" I asked.

"Yeah, I used to have a hand" she said matter-of-factly. She looked at me like she was waiting for a new reaction. Unsure of what to say, I just stared. "My brother was cutting the grass with our dad's tractor one day, and I fell asleep in the field. I sleep spread-eagle like this," she said, stretching. I think of a broken starfish and how its limbs regenerate. "I got lucky he only cut my hand off."

"Your brother cut your hand off," I said, repeating the words. Lonely of my lucidity, the flatness in my voice surprised me.

"Yeah, it didn't hurt as much as you think. I didn't even know it was gone for the longest." After that, we walked to the campground gas station and got ice cream.

A few weeks after summer ended, I thought of her again. We were both in school now, she with her one hand, and I with my two. I was throwing basketballs and playing piano. Typing papers for English and blowing shit up in Science. I braid my sister's hair every night and help my mother cook. Even two hands aren't enough for cooking. I swing bats in P.E. and beat all the boys in RBI stats. I tried to do it using one hand the other day, and it dropped from my hand during the swing. Everyone laughed. The pitch stung my ribcage.

Eventually hands became my obsession. I examined my own so much in class, Mr. Gibbs asked me if I'd been smokin' the plant. I looked at his grody hands as he flung them around during his presentation on World War II. His hands wouldn't have been stable enough to steer a U-boat. I grabbed my mother's one night and moved around all the rings that fill in the gaps between her skinny fingers. I matched her aging veins with my subtle ones.



My dad let me hold his for a while as we watched TV. I looked as his palm and concluded that his gypsy reading is the same as mine-- our indentions almost identical. His hands aren't as blue and veiny as my mother's, his flesh tanned and weather-hardened. His fingernails are complete shit. Four are blackened from construction work, and the others are chipped or gone altogether. My grandmother's have arthritis. When I touched them, she winced. "Don't you stress my damn hands too much. The impact might kill me," she said. From now on, I'll treat them as carefully as the red button on an explosive.

My sister's hands are dainty and pale and used to touching all over her boyfriend. He probably wouldn't like her too much if she didn't have hands. And my brother's right hand is in a cast for two more weeks because some chubby kid fell on it playing Twister. He cried for five straight days and said it was going to ruin his Pro baseball career.

I look at mine again, wondering if the girl with my name ever looks at her own like this-- but wishing she had what I have. Wishing she could do all of the things I do where two hands are needed. Or maybe just laughing at my need for both.